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Statement of Melvin Kerchee, Jr.
Secretary-Treasurer of the Comanche Nation
Before the
United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Oversight Hearing Regarding
"Contributions of Native American Code Talkers in American Military History"
September 22, 2004

Chairman and honorable members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am Melvin Kerchee, Jr., Secretary-Treasurer of the Comanche Nation. I have the honor this morning, as the official representative of the government of the Comanche Nation, to accompany Mr. Charles Chibitty, the last of the Comanche Code Talkers. It is a title he carries with deep pride and a certain degree of sadness. The pride he feels arises from the opportunity to serve his country, the United States of America, up the slopes of Utah Beach at Normandy and across the battlefields of Europe, during World War II. It is a pride he feels because he and thirteen other Comanche warriors were able to use their own Comanche language to devise an unbreakable code. It is a pride that all Indians feel because of the numbers of American Indians who enlisted in the military. The *Saturday Evening Post* editorial board suggested in 1941 that the draft would not be needed if other young man volunteered like American Indian men. Historians say that Indians enlisted in greater proportions to their numbers than all other people in the United States.

The sadness he feels arises from the fact that recognition of the extraordinary service of the Code Talkers and the work of his comrades in arms comes in the twilight of his years and that his fellow Code Talkers are not here to share this recognition. Gone are:

Haddon Codynah
Robert Holder
Forrest Kassanovoid
Willington Mihecoby
Perry Noyebad
Clifford Otitivo
Simmons Parker
Melvin Permansu
Dick Red Elk
Elgin Red Elk
Larry Saupitty
Morris Sunrise
Willie Yackeschi

The story of the Code Talkers was considered classified information and not released until 1968. The story has leaked into history and our awareness like a dripping faucet, drop by drop. The Navajo Code Talkers are of course the most prominent in the public at large, but there has been little recognition in the United States of other tribes' military service as Code Talkers.

For the Comanche, it was initially the French Government who recognized their contribution when, in 1989, it awarded the Choctaw and Comanche chiefs the Chevalier de L'Ordre National du Merit (Chevalier of the National Order of Merit) in recognition of the code talker duties for their respective service in World War I and World War II. At that time Forrest Kassanavoid and Roderick Red Elk were still with us.

In 1995, Mr. Chibitty received the Knowlton Award, created by the Military Intelligence Corps Association to recognize significant contributions to military intelligence efforts. The award is named in honor of Revolutionary War Army Lt. Col. Thomas Knowlton.

Finally, on Nov. 30, 1999, Mr. Chibitty, then 78, was honored in Washington, D.C. at the Department of Defense, as the last surviving World War II Army Comanche "Code Talker" during a ceremony in the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes. Sadly, however, there has never been formal recognition of the Comanche Code Talkers by the United States government.

Two bills introduced in Congress, S. 540 and H.R. 1093, as the "Code Talkers Recognition Act," focus on the contribution of American Indian soldiers during the Second World War. These bills or similar legislation, as well as this hearing, help focus attention on the critical strategic service provided by the Code Talkers that is long overdue. I would urge Congress to act quickly so that these American Indian warriors, these United States soldiers can be honored properly. Thank you.